

## CHAPTER 27

### Strengthening the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations: Partners for Sustainable Development

— Theodora Carroll-Foster —



#### THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have played and continue to play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. Due to their wide range of experience over many decades, NGOs are increasingly well positioned to play an important role in helping society move away from unsustainable development patterns. A major attribute of NGOs has been their independent and autonomous nature, which is also a precondition of real participation. But a problem is arising, as NGOs become increasingly dependent on governments for funding, their independence may be eroded and their voices may be checked. In recent years, the NGO community has developed a global network, that could be tapped, enabled, and strengthened in support of both government and private sector efforts to achieve the common goals of sustainability.

NGOs and environmental NGOs (ENGOS) combined, possess well-established and diverse experience, expertise and capacity which could be useful in mobilizing support and deriving solutions for sustainability efforts. With their expertise and abilities in such areas as education, poverty alleviation and environmental protection, NGOs and ENGOS could be more greatly involved in both United Nations' and national governments' mechanisms for making policies and decisions on sustainable development and for reviewing and evaluating how Agenda 21 is implemented. But they continue to meet with resistance, albeit somewhat diminished, on the part of both governments and UN agencies. In Canada, over 150 development NGOs are formally registered with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and hundreds of ENGOS (large and small) exist across Canada. Many have developed links with NGOs in developing countries, such as with the Third World Network based in Penang, Malaysia.

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A number of regional networks, such as the South Asia Partnership, have been established to handle regional or transboundary issues and to share information. The scope and strength of the NGO movement, which encompasses over and above the development and environmental NGOs, women's organizations, business associations, civil society groups, and not-for-profit agencies, was demonstrated at the Global Forum, the NGO event that was held in parallel with UNCED at Rio in June 1992.

### **PROGRAM AREAS AND OBJECTIVES**

In order to ensure that the full potential contribution of NGOs is realized, the Chapter recommends four specific objectives which governments and international bodies should undertake within the areas of communication and cooperation:

- (1) mechanisms to allow NGOs to play their partnership role responsibly and effectively in the process of environmentally sound and sustainable development, should be developed by governments and international bodies;
- (2) a process to review formal procedures and mechanisms to involve NGOs at all levels (policy-making, decision-making, implementation) should be initiated by the UN system and governments;
- (3) a "mutually productive dialogue" should be established at the national level between all governments and NGOs regarding their respective roles in environmentally sound and socially responsible sustainable development by 1995; and,
- (4) NGOs should be promoted and allowed to participate in the conception, establishment, and evaluation of official mechanisms and procedures to review Agenda 21 implementation.

In order to achieve the above, the United Nations system was called upon to enhance NGO participation in inter-agency meetings and UN conferences, especially in Agenda 21 follow-up. Governments were urged to involve NGOs in national measures to implement and monitor Agenda 21; expand NGOs' involvement in formal and informal education, and public awareness; and to provide NGOs with all necessary data and information for their effective contribution.

## CANADIAN POSITIONS AT RIO

### 1. Official Canadian Position

At Rio, the official Canadian position involved four key objectives:

- (1) to seek support internationally for the principle of NGO involvement as social partners and for the review of official procedures and mechanisms for the substantive involvement of NGOs at all levels, from policy and decision-making to implementation both nationally and internationally (including within UN institutions);
- (2) to seek to strengthen the commitment of governments to develop productive dialogue with independent, self-organized groups of NGOs and to recognize and empower them in implementing environmentally sound and sustainable development;
- (3) to seek to strengthen support for NGO funding at the international level so as to continue the networking of NGOs internationally, especially for monitoring and reporting on the state of the global environment; and,
- (4) to avoid approval of new institutions for achieving these objectives.

Overall, Canada preferred to work with existing institutions at the international level and with its own mechanisms internally within the country. It did not see the need for new institutions, but rather envisaged existing institutions becoming more inclusive of and responsive to NGOs.

### 2. Non-Governmental Organizations

The two primary objectives of NGOs were:

- that UNCED recognize that the term "NGO" can not effectively be used as a generic word which encompasses all non-government groups, especially given their diverse interests, roles and abilities; and,
- that there be consistent multi-sectoral participation, including NGOs, in policy making, management, and all other program areas addressed within Agenda 21. Specifically, NGOs wanted their expertise, experience, and capacities, to be recognized and have a significant active role in the global movement towards sustainability.

In the past, under United Nations terminology, the definition of NGO has meant any independent non-government group -- including profit, non-profit, indigenous, labour and other groups. Canadian NGOs were actively supportive and involved with the international NGO lobbying of UNCED which strongly advocated for the need to

recognize and address different types of NGOs. Indeed, as a result of this international lobbying, NGOs were successful in adding to the originally proposed list of Agenda 21 issues an additional 10 chapters (numbers 23-32) which focused on the roles of nine specific major groups of society in the global movement toward sustainability. As such, it can be said that the two main objectives of Canadian NGOs were met.

Regarding the content of Chapter 27, NGOs were pleased with terminology such as:

- recognizing that NGOs play "a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy";
- NGO credibility arises from the "responsible and constructive role they play in society";
- NGOs possess "well-established and diverse experience, expertise and capacity" which is "important to the review and implementation of environmentally sound and socially responsible sustainable development"; and,
- NGOs are/have a "global network, that should be tapped, enabled, and strengthened in support of the efforts to achieve the common goals (of sustainability).

However, Canadian NGOs were, in general, disappointed in the lack of specific concrete programs and resources which would enable active participation of NGOs in post-UNCED follow-up.

Many of the NGOs' concerns and agreements on specific sustainability issues were encapsulated in the NGO Treaties (also known as Citizen's Commitments, or Protocols), which were agreements between north and south NGOs on actions which they indicated they were prepared to carry out. These were developed at the NGO Global Forum at Rio, which paralleled the UNCED meeting.

### 3. Business and Industry

With regard to the content of Chapter 27, business concerns were related to recommendations for strengthening the role of NGOs, because it seemed that the granting of new rights to such groups (i.e., to participate in decision-making processes) would not be available to others in society. Such proposals were viewed as risky to the democratic process, unless properly framed. Business thought that it was questionable whether significantly enhancing the ability of NGOs to access legal action, except in specific instances of a clear failure by government to act to protect the environment, would bring about corresponding environmental improvements. Moreover, business believed that the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations should be a job for governments, which are politically accountable for their actions, and which have the responsibility to make decisions that are simultaneously good for the environment and the economy. NGOs, by contrast, are not seen as being accountable or responsible to the larger community, but only to themselves or their immediate constituencies.

#### 4. Indigenous

While Canadian Indigenous representatives supported the need for a strong role for NGOs, it should be noted that Indigenous organizations in Canada, in general, do not consider themselves to non-governmental organizations - rather they view themselves as the legitimate representatives of their constituents - and as such, focused their attention on *Chapter 26 The Role of Indigenous People and their Communities*.

### COMMITMENTS MADE BY CANADIANS

#### 1. Legally-binding Documents

None.

#### 2. Political Pronouncements

Although specific political pronouncements about the inclusion of NGOs were not made, in practice and in generally accepted principle, NGOs are increasingly being included in a systematic and systemic way. This was evidenced in the support of NGOs during the UNCED process.

#### 3. Alternative NGO Treaties and Kari-Oca

##### NGO Treaties

At the same time as UNCED, two major international events were also held at Rio: the International Non-Governmental Organization Forum (Global Forum), and the Kari-Oca Conference. At the Global Forum, 3,100 NGOs discussed a number of matters related to environment and development and produced a parallel set of documents: an NGO Earth Charter and 39 Alternative NGO Treaties. Canadian NGOs played a significant role in developing the treaties and took a lead in coordinating their dissemination. Of these treaties, four addressed the issues discussed in Chapter 27.

##### *Code of Conduct for NGOs*

The NGO Code of Conduct outlines ethical and accountability agreements NGOs could sign in order to build up constituency bases and truly serve the people within their communities. For groups working together on various campaigns, their treaty's overriding principle is that there be consultation among NGOs before anyone takes a position that might affect another. In the case of an NGO working outside its own country, Northern and Southern groups should collaborate on the basis of equal partnership and a recognition that each group has the major responsibility for activities within its own country.

*Treaty for NGO Cooperation and Sharing of Resources*

NGOs commit in this treaty to certain actions, including responding to specific requests of other NGO signatories of the treaty, such as conducting research and advocacy. NGOs also suggest that they participate in two or more of the following activities annually: personnel exchange programs with other NGOs; workshops or skills and resources training sessions; raising public awareness in respective countries about specific activities; and assisting NGO partners in their fund raising. NGOs assert that they will strive to share the equivalent of at least one percent of their annual budgets with other NGOs. No new global mechanisms will be formed to administer the treaty.

*Rio Framework Treaty on NGO Global Decision-Making*

Within the Rio Framework Treaty on NGO Global Decision-Making, certain objectives were outlined by NGOs, which relate directly to strengthening the role of NGOs as partners in sustainable development (the subject of Chapter 27). The three general objectives of the treaty are:

- to strengthen existing networks and global alliances to promote and further the recognition of NGOs, as well as participatory democracy and the empowerment of all oppressed peoples;
- to reinforce the recognition of all NGOs as one of the key elements of sustainable development; and,
- to strengthen NGO's rights and means of influencing the decision-making processes by using existing legal instruments and international commitments, as well as by promoting new and more progressive ones.

Overall, the alternative NGO treaties are far-reaching and cover many aspects of the North and South NGOs' concerns.

*International Treaty Between NGOs and Indigenous Peoples*

The Proposed International Treaty - Northern Non-Government Organizations' and Indigenous Peoples' Development, June 1992, directly addressed the need for recognizing and strengthening the role of Indigenous Peoples and their communities in the sustainable development process. The treaty states the following areas must be recognized and addressed by northern NGO's entering into development activities:

- transfer of values - must minimize the damage done by the imposition of western values;
- community control, management and ownership - development must be under their control in accordance with their values and institutions;

- **community-based planning** - pre-planning must be conducted with community participation;
- **Indigenous knowledge** - development should be based on Indigenous knowledge
- **spirituality** - development should recognize it;
- **respect** - development should note respect for community, Mother Earth, other peoples;
- **sharing** - reciprocity at all levels;
- **technology** - ensure culturally appropriate technologies are controlled by Indigenous Peoples and intellectual property rights are protected;
- **sustainable development** - Indigenous knowledge in this area should be shared;
- **capacity building** - to allow Indigenous Peoples to develop on their own;
- **destabilizing Indigenous societies** - discontinuation of disruptive practices such as westernized schools, religions, etc.;
- **western models** - will not be used;
- **Indigenous non-government organizations** - northern NGO's will support their creation through funding and training;
- **new Indigenous institutions** - northern NGO's support the development of new regional and international development organizations which will include the research and collection of Indigenous knowledge for the improvement of resource management systems and for educational purposes;
- **Indigenous financial institutions** - managed and controlled by Indigenous Peoples and which have the power to deal with international agencies to obtain more financing and support;
- **northern NGO accountability** - must establish greater accountability measures to Indigenous Peoples; and,
- **consultations and harmonization** - northern NGO's must develop policies which provide consultative mechanisms with Indigenous Peoples and to harmonize their policies with Indigenous Peoples' priorities, values and culture and with Indigenous Peoples' consent.

### Kari-Oca

The second alternative forum at Rio was the International Conference on Territory, Environment and Development (the Kari-Oca Conference). The Kari-Oca Conference was held immediately prior to UNCED by and for the world's Indigenous peoples. More than 650 Indigenous representatives participated in meetings and cultural events during the conference. They developed and adopted a 109-point Indigenous Peoples' Earth Charter.

### DEFICIENCIES, GAPS AND CONSTRAINTS WITHIN CHAPTER 27

The most obvious gap within Chapter 27 is that the chapter does not provide suggestions as to how to effectively implement the strengthening of the roles of NGOs. No real agreements, processes, or mechanisms were put in place to ensure that the general objectives of what governments should do are actualized. In addition, the need for substantial new financial resources for NGOs is largely ignored.



The chapter's statement that governments need to "strengthen legislative measures necessary to enable the establishment of consultative groups by NGOs" and "ensure NGOs the right to protect the public interest through legal action" does not address or consider that these two principles assume that countries are all given to democracy or at least democratic participation by their citizens and communities. As such, the chapter side-steps the issue that many governments are very suspicious of NGO and peoples' movements, and that these governments often put up road blocks, including persecution, to halt the momentum and action of NGOs.

The chapter also does not address the nature of some NGOs who may prefer to work on (and often feel that their role is) monitoring and challenging the governments. Such NGOs often feel that working with governments would be a form of coercion and control. Other NGOs prefer to work with governments in a participatory, consensus building approach. Indeed, one of the main deficiencies of the chapter is that it still treats NGOs in a monolithic way, assuming that NGOs have a common cause, agenda and approach. Given the huge diversity of NGOs this is usually not the case. Even "non-profit NGOs" are tremendously diverse. They have different foci and range -- from local to national to international foci. They represent different sectors of society, not only those already noted as different major groups within Agenda 21 (women, youth, labour, etcetera) but also religion, disabled, environmental, developmental, academic, media, etcetera. They have varied approaches, plans, interests, outlooks, and actions.

Finally, the chapter does not adequately define many of the words, such as "NGO" or "partnership," on which the whole thrust of the text hinges. As such, much of the chapter is wide open to interpretation.

### **COMPARISON BETWEEN CURRENT CANADIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY AND COMMITMENTS MADE**

The Canadian government has consistently made efforts to integrate NGOs and their perspectives in the UNCED process. Specifically, Canada supported NGO involvement and participation by:

- providing a set grant for NGO consultation, coordination, participation and travel during the UNCED preparatory process which was channeled through the Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED (CPCU);
- seeking NGO input during the government's development and preparation of positions on the UNCED issues; and,
- providing seats on its delegations to the Preparatory Committees, as well as to UNCED itself, for NGO, business and indigenous representatives.

Canada has continued to seek NGO participation in post UNCED international fora, such as the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development.



In Canada the Canadian government is supportive of an active and multisectoral initiative at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. Examples include: the *Projet de société*; the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy; provincial Round Tables; etc. However, many NGOs are concerned with the minimal financial support provided by government for such input and involvement by NGOs.

### **CANADIAN ACTIVITIES EVOLVING THROUGH THE SUSTAINABILITY PROCESS**

Canadian NGOs at the local, regional, national and international level continue to be actively involved in all of the sustainability issues, including those issues not addressed by UNCED. Some focus on one or two issues, some focus on the inter-relationships between specific issues, and others take holistic approaches. NGOs are involved in education, lobbying for change, networking, research, consensus building, etcetera -- a huge range of programs and initiatives.

Some NGOs are responding to either, or both, UNCED and the Global Forum in a variety of ways. Some NGOs promote the products, others critique the products, others use them as educational tools or as a basis for new and/or continued discussions. Other NGOs have not responded in any way to either conference, but continue to work on sustainability issues in the manner that they have done over past decades. Some NGOs prefer to work alone, other are continuing to build partnerships with other NGOs, and others are building partnerships with institutions and/or business and/or governments.

During the UNCED process, the Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED (CPCU) was formed to facilitate and coordinate the active involvement of Canadian NGOs in the preparatory process leading up to and including UNCED. It was comprised of many existing umbrella networks representing environmental, developmental, public policy, indigenous, labour, women, youth, peace and interfaith groups. Some of its activities included: communication to and among its member networks; national review and strategy session in preparation for PrepCom IV and Rio; facilitating input to the government's process of developing positions for UNCED; preparing and distributing reports on the status of the UNCED Process; and developing a cross-Canada public mobilization program.

Post-UNCED, Canadian NGOs are establishing an NGO Forum for Sustainability, a new organizational coalition, to continue the multisectoral policy dialogue undertaken through the CPCU. The purpose of the Forum is to continue to provide a forum for NGOs from different social change sectors in Canada to work together to promote a sustainable future locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

Regarding the NGO Global Forum and its NGO treaties, the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) has taken the lead in promoting and distributing the treaties as well as promoting and continuing the North-South NGO dialogue.

A large number of initiatives are being undertaken by business and industry to move towards more public consultation; including by NGOs/ENGOS, and towards more consensus-building models instead of conflictual negotiations. One example is the Mining Association of Canada's Whitehorse Mining Initiative which has developed multi-stakeholder processes using the greater involvement of NGOs.

In September 1992, the Mining Association of Canada (MAC) proposed that Mines Ministers initiate a process of multi-stakeholder study and consultation on the development of a "Whitehorse Chapter" and a coordinated strategy for the minerals and metals section. The Mines Ministers agreed to a process to work towards the "Whitehorse Mining Initiative" (WMI), using a planning group of industry, government, labour, environment and aboriginal representatives.

A Progress Report on the WMI was made to the meeting of Mines Ministers during the Prospectors and Developers Conference in March 1993. The input from labour, aboriginal and environmental interests, among others, were seen as vital to the results of the Initiative.

The WMI intends to take the results of its analysis and find a way whereby the respective goals and objectives of the multi-stakeholders affected by the mining industry can be brought together, as well as showing that the mining industry's contribution to economic prosperity in Canada is important.

Overall the strengthening of the role of NGOs as partners in and for sustainable development is occurring throughout Canada through a diverse array of organizations including: the Alberta Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, The Bruce Trail Association, the Canadian, the Clean Nova Scotia Foundation, Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, Micah Institute of Southern Alberta, Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, Saskatchewan Eco Network, Women for a Just and Healthy Planet, and the Canadian Environmental Network to name of few.

Canada's support for, and funding of, NGOs is not new. Among industrialized nations, Canada has been one of the most supportive. CIDA, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) have long recognized the importance of involving NGOs in a fully participatory way in their programming. Both CIDA and IDRC have established extensive policies for ensuring NGO consultation and participation, and over the last two decades allocated considerable financial resources to NGO support and development. For example, the IDRC has supported the Third World Network and its initiatives, including the production of research papers on key Agenda 21 topics from a southern perspective. The NRTEE has several NGO representatives sitting as full members of the round table.

The Green Plan committed the Federal Government to consult actively with the public on environmental issues and to provide funding to NGOs/ENGOS to enable them to expand their public participation activities. As a consequence, the level of participation in government decision-making by and in partnership with NGOs/ENGOS has risen dramatically and is among the most participatory in the world. This has been aided by such umbrella groups as the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), various provincial councils, and the Canadian Environmental Network (CEN).

The involvement and building of partnerships with NGOs goes beyond NGOs and governments; NGOs and indigenous, NGOs and NGOs; and NGOs and business. Institutions such as the IDRC and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) have also developed partnerships with NGOs.

As well, there are increasing numbers of fora where all of these sectors of society work together in partnership on sustainability issues. Examples include the national and provincial round tables on the environment and the economy; multi-sectoral consultations around government positions to the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development; and the *Projet de Société*.

#### **OTHER RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY-RELATED FORA**

Many NGOs have observer status at the United Nations and with various UN agencies. They have established liaison with the World Bank, the Commission for Sustainable Development, the Earth Council, etc., and have developed many regional and global networks.

Global Forum 1994

#### **SUGGESTED READINGS AND INFORMATION SOURCES**

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The Centre for Our Common Future (Publishers of *The Network*, a monthly newsletter which monitors and reports on follow-up activities to the Earth Summit and *The Bulletin*, a comprehensive quarterly journal of sustainable development initiatives throughout the world), Palais Wilson, 52 rue des Paquis, CH-1201, Geneva, Switzerland, tel (022) 732 71 17, fax (022) 738 50 46.

The Earth Negotiations Bulletin (successor to the Earth Summit Bulletin) is available on E-mail in the APC computer conference on unced.news.

NGO Forum for Sustainability, 63 Sparks Street, Room 603, Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 5A6, tel (613) 238-3811, fax (613) 594-2948.

United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development, Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, Room S-3060, United Nations, New York, N.Y., 10017, USA, tel (212) 963-5959.

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# PROJET DE SOCIÉTÉ

ASSESSMENT OF  
AGENDA 21  
DOCUMENT AND INFORMATION  
COMMITTEE

EVALUATION DE  
L'ACTION 21  
COMITÉ DE LA DOCUMENTATION  
ET DE L'INFORMATION

TOWARD A NATIONAL  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
STRATEGY FOR CANADA

VERS UNE STRATÉGIE NATIONALE  
DE DÉVELOPPEMENT DURABLE  
AU CANADA

THIRD NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS ASSEMBLY  
DECEMBER 16-17, 1993, OTTAWA, CANADA  
TROISIÈME ASSEMBLÉE DES INTERVENANTS NATIONAUX  
LES 16 ET 17 DÉCEMBRE 1993 À OTTAWA, CANADA



<b>Chapter 20</b> - Environmentally Sound Management of Hazardous Wastes . . . . .	239
<b>Chapter 21</b> - Environmentally Sound Management of Solid Wastes and Sewage-Related Issues . . . . .	251
<b>Chapter 22</b> - Safe and Environmentally Sound Management of Radioactive Wastes . . . . .	263
<b>Chapter 23</b> - Strengthening the Role of Major Groups . . . . .	271
<b>Chapter 24</b> - Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development . . . . .	273
<b>Chapter 25</b> - Children and Youth in Sustainable Development . . . . .	283
<b>Chapter 26</b> - Recognizing and Strengthening the Role of Indigenous People and their Communities . . . . .	299
<b>Chapter 27</b> - Strengthening the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations . . . . .	313
<b>Chapter 28</b> - Local Authorities' Initiatives in Support of Agenda 21 . . . . .	325
<b>Chapter 29</b> - Strengthening the Role of Workers and their Trade Unions . . . . .	335
<b>Chapter 30</b> - Strengthening the Role of Business and Industry . . . . .	341
<b>Chapter 31</b> - The Scientific and Technological Community . . . . .	353
<b>Chapter 32</b> - Strengthening the Role of Farmers . . . . .	361
<b>Chapter 33</b> - Financial Assistance . . . . .	369
<b>Chapter 34</b> - Technology Transfer . . . . .	379
<b>Chapter 35</b> - Science for Sustainable Development . . . . .	389
<b>Chapter 36</b> - Education, Public Awareness and Training . . . . .	399
<b>Chapter 37</b> - National Mechanisms and International Cooperation for Capacity-Building . . . . .	421
<b>Chapter 38</b> - International Institutional Arrangements . . . . .	429
<b>Chapter 39</b> - International Legal Instruments and Mechanisms . . . . .	439
<b>Chapter 40</b> - Information for Decision-Making . . . . .	447